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ABSTRACT

Reasons for the glaring gaps in recommendations for humanities and social science emphasis in the National Commission on Excellence in Education report, "A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," are examined; and remedies are proposed. It is important to recognize that only 4 of the Commission members represented the social sciences and humanities; of the other 14 members, 7 have degrees in business or education, and 7 have degrees in science and mathematics. Further, in regard to the responsibilities with which they were charged, the Commission changed the mandate given them by Secretary of Education Bell and sought information that reflected the dominant expertise on the Commission. Because business, science, and technological interests dominated both the process and product of the Commission, both social scientists and humanists must question the validity and breadth of the resulting report. At the top of the list of five proposed remedies is the recommendation that a second presidential commission carrying a similar weight as the first and comprised of a balanced representation of the disciplines be impaneled. (RM)

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The Humanities At Risk: The Quiet Crisis

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Paper presented at the Southwestern Social Science Meeting (Fort Worth, TX, March 23, 1984) and the Community College Humanities Association Conference (Dallas, TX, October 25-26, 1984).

In April, 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its report A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. Perhaps no other examination of American education has stimulated such an immediate and widespread response from both the public and the academic community. Responding to perceptions, as well as statistical evidence of the decline in the quality of America's education, and its product, the students, the report struck a chord as much by the way it was written and presented as by the import of its contents. In forceful, stirring, and eminently quotable text the report issued a warning and a call to nationwide action by both the public and the education community. The authors' summarized the imperative for reform with:

> It is their America, and the America of all of us, that is at risk; it is to each of us that this imperative is addressed. It is by our willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see it through, that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again.[1]

Who can object to the facts exposed in the report and this dramatic call to action? Politicians, school administrators, teachers, and public interest groups responded swiftly and with overwhelming approval to the work of the Commission. State governments, both executive and legislative bodies, reacted to the report by instituting a variety of reforms intended to upgrade public education, such as in the 1984 Texas Education Reform Bill (HB 72), with its sweeping changes, from teacher pay to curricula. Local school districts, following the national and state examples have and are instituting their own individual responses to A Nation At Risk,

while the public vigorously applauds all of these efforts. What "right-thinking" American would gainsay these reforms and the spirit which animates them?

We too are heartened by the sudden, and parenthetically unexpected and long overdue, concern for the quality of America's education and students. We too commend the actions resulting from increased awareness of the condition of public education and the consequences inherent to the nation in continuation of the previous course. As The Nation At Risk is oft-quoted warning, while at the same time indicting,

> If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. [2]

we too must stand with the Report's mandate for educational reform.

But, as humanists and social scientists concerned with the human values of our nation and the future of the humanistic and social science studies we are shocked by the glaring gaps in recommendations for humanities and social science emphasis. Dare we call it the "human gap?"

Thus far, The Nation At Risk has elicited nothing but approval from the nation's educators at large. Those in the social sciences and humanities have been gratified that at least the nation is taking cognizance of the desperate state into which education has fallen, and proceeding

on the assumption that anything added to education will move education as a whole forward. But, humanists beware! A close reading of A Nation At Risk, and the statements of public officials does not bear out the perception of a national concern for education as a whole. Indeed, human studies are not an imperative in the Commission's report and priorities.

While judging America and American education from historical, sociological, political, geographic, and economic viewpoints, the report diverts from the full range of academic disciplines to follow the scientific-technological road to success. Throughout the report, a certain irony is apparent in that the authors of A Nation At Risk display a conceptual framework of education as a preparation for the world of work alone. A substantial danger exists in that the irony and its implications are being swept aside by the enthusiasm of reform. Unmentioned in the Report's "Indicators of Risk"[3] are the values and ideas necessary for the maintenance of a humane and democratic society.

Measurements which might also have been included in the "Indicators of Risk" include: the increasing voter apathy, due to the lack of understanding of the importance of politics in the life and prosperity of nations and individuals; the narcissistic mood of the nation's youth, apparent to parents and teacher alike; the incapacity to make use of increasing amounts of leisure time, without resorting to technological support systems, found in mass media entertainment; the inability of increasing numbers of supposedly educated individuals to

distinguish reality from expectations, attested by employers as well as educators; the trap of present-mindedness, which locks today's students into a world without past or future, devoid of the traditions and experience that transmit values and knowledge, as regularly reported by parents and historians alike. In sum, these too are measurements of the health of a society, and thus these too are measurements of America's future prospects.

How has this "human gap" arisen? Why are the humanities and social sciences selectively excluded from the concerns stressed in the report? It may be that some answers can be suggested by examination of the individuals responsible for the report.

On August 5, 1981, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell signed the authorization establishing the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Secretary Bell, with degrees in science and education, appointed eighteen members to the Commission. Of the eighteen, seven members have undergraduate or graduate degrees in either business or education. Seven members are degreed in sciences and mathematics. Two individuals hold degrees in English, while the remaining two come from political science and literature. This body of individuals was charged with the following responsibilities.

" 1. To review and synthesize the data and scholarly literature on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities, both public and private, with special concern for the educational experience of teen-age youth;

2. To examine and to compare and contrast the curricula, standards, and expectations of the educational systems of several advanced countries with those of the United States;

3. To study a representative sampling of university and college admission standards and lower division course requirements with particular reference to the impact upon the enhancement of quality and the promotion of excellence such standards may have on high

school curricula and on expected levels of high school academic achievement;

4. To review and to describe educational programs that are recognized as preparing students who consistently attain higher than average scores in college entrance examinations and who meet with uncommon success the demands placed on them by the nation's colleges and universities;

5. To review the major changes that have occurred in American education as well as events in society during the past quarter century that have significantly affected educational achievement;

6. To hold hearings and to receive testimony and expert advice on efforts that could and should be taken to foster higher levels of quality and academic excellence in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities;

7. To do all other things needed to define the problems of and the barriers to attaining greater levels of excellence in American education; and

8. To report and to make practical recommendations for action to be taken by educators, public officials, governing boards, parents, and others having a vital interest in American education and a capacity to influence it for the better.[4]

While there are those that might want to change or expand the phrasing of one or the other purposes and functions mandated by the Charter, there is little quarrel with the overall statement of the goals. Did the Commission in fact carry out its mandate? Contrast its mandate with the Commission's statment of"the specific problems on which we were seeking information(e.g., the transition from secondary to post-secondary education, the use of educational technology, mathematics education, cooperative educational ventures with business and industry),..."[5]

What is certain is that the Commission did capture the attention of a nation strangled in the arms of complacency, and for this they are justly applauded. But, clearly the Commission changed the Secretary's mandate, and sought information that reflected the dominant expertise on the Commission.

Both social scientists and humanists must question the validity and breadth of the resulting report. Given the evident and significant gaps in relation to humanistic and social science education, it is not unreasonable to look closely at the commission members and their work. Only four of the panel's eighteen members can be said in any sense to represent the social sciences and humanities. Of the four, one attended only a single meeting, which apparently was simply a public relations event. And then there were three. The three, while dedicated individuals, were not only overwhelmingly outnumbered, but also could not muster the authoritative credentials to counter the forces that were in control of the Commission.

A source close to the Board stated that three powerful members took charge of the report, including its direction and content. The final version, persented to the public, was the product of yet another member who's task it was to draft the approved contents into its dramatic and penetrating form. Without exception, the three responsible for the substance of the report are among the most highly respected scientific minds in the nation. Pity the three well-intentioned, lonely, individuals who marched to a different drummer. Two did make an attempt to influence the direction of the report to include humanities and social sciences, but their mark is found only in the statements that "(students) should know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture." and "the teaching of social studies in high school should be designed to enable students to fix their places and possibilities within

the larger social and cultural structure...."[6]

The extent of the failure of the report to emphasize equally the importance of total education for the individual and society is apparent and calculated. Business, science, and technological interests dominated both the process and product of the Commission.

It is indeed a quiet crisis that is upon all concerned for the social sciences and humanities. Between well-intentioned and much awaited reform spirit and the complexity of tactical devices for increasing performance, the sense of education as a means by which to choose the better and reject the worse finds no place. What is the risk to life itself, if directives are focused upon other, deemed more important, values which succeed in annihilation of the purpose of man's existence ---a civil society?

Already facing a waning of student interest in liberal learning, evident in a recent report which shows that all institutions, two-year and four-year colleges and universities, surveyed found students expressing a 35.8 percent decrease in student attitude and behavior toward liberal learning, with a 15.3 to 26.3 percent decrease in interest in public affairs and political activism respectively.[7] How can teachers of literature, political science, history, philosophy, languages, art and music expect to survive, much less grow?

Students, increasing their career interests by 68.2 percent,[8] see little useful purpose to the humanities and social science components of education, even before changes recommended in A Nation At Risk.

Powerful forces, to which we can add The Nation At Risk report, are driving the entire world onward into a technological future.

In defense of the Commission, recommendations do include English, and social studies components in the high school. In addition to these, which are considered part of the New Basics, foreign language, fine and performing arts and vocational education are given auxiliary status. And, while the Commission observes "These areas compliment the New Basics, and they should demand the same level of performance as the Basics."[9] the thrust of the report is not directed towards social science and humanities concerns.

Industrial competition with Japan and other nations is the stimulus and driving force behind the report, which is well expressed in the report's statement that

> Despite the obstacles and difficulties that inhibit the pursuit of superior educational attainment, we are confident, with history as our guide, that we can meet our goal. The American educational system has responded to previous challenges with remarkable success. In the 19th century our land-grant colleges and universities provided the research and training that developed our Nation's natural resources and the rich agricultural bounty of the American farm. From the late 1800s through mid-20th century, American schools provided the educated workforce needed to seal the success of the Industrial Revolution and to provide the margin of victory in two world wars. In the early part of this century and continuing to this very day, our schools have absorbed vast waves of immigrants and educated them and their children to productive citizenship. Similarly, the Nation's Black colleges have provided opportunity and undergraduate education to the vast majority of college-educated Black Americans.
>
> More recently,our institutions of higher education have provided the scientists and skilled technicians who helped us transcend the boundaries of our planet. In the last 30 years, the schools have been a major vehicle for expanding social opportunity, and now graduate 75 percent of our young people from high school. Indeed, the proportion of Americans of col-

> lege age enrolled in higher education is nearly twice that of Japan and far exceeds other nations such as France, West Germany, and the Soviet Union. Moreover, when international comparisons were last made a decade ago, the top 9 percent of American students compared favorably in achievement with their peers in other countries.
>
> In addition, many large urban areas in recent years report that average student achievement in elementary schools is improving. More and more schools are also offering advanced placement programs and programs for gifted and talented students, and more and more students are enrolling in them.
>
> We are the inheritors of a past that gives us every reason to believe that we will succeed.[10]

No where in this powerfully worded statement by the Commission is there expressed a concern for what has been called the moral abdication of the people, in which "...many students are plain indifferent to moral questions beyond the immediate and personal, or if they do consider the questions, they are convinced that they are powerless to effect change."[11] Indeed, the report's authors' use history only to demonstrate that previously the educational institution was a success in America because it created the human resources necessary to compete and triumph in world commerce.

It is without question that survival is better than its opposite, but all humanists find it their duty to question the value of the life which is lived with only survival as its goal.

Reform of a Reform

Today at least thirty-five state governments either have or are in the process of revising their instructional programs in light of The Nation At Risk report. Again, while the reform is necessary and long overdue, it appears that the reform movement itself is already in need of reform.

Given the imbalance of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, we propose the following remedies.

1. A Second Presidential Commission, thus carrying a similar weight as the First, to include a balanced representation of the disciplines and expertise to be impaneled for the purpose of delineating national educational needs.
2. Mandate that the new Commission will seek information about exemplary programs beyond the prior Commission's focus, which concentrated on a narrow band of disciplines in education.
3. Humanists and social scientists must become self-consciously engaged in deliberate promotion and pursuit of their disciplines' interest, thus reversing the passive roles associated with these disciplines.
4. That institutions,such as the Community College Humanities Association (CCHA), undertake vigorous and determined efforts to educate the American populace to the values inherent in humanities and social sciences, recognizing that the aloofness sought and cultivated by those in our disciplines is bought at the cost of retreat from reality in which the world is dominated by technocrats who may one day see no need at all for history, philosophy, literature, etc.
5. That regional meetings, Boards of humanities and social science organizations, take action, including expression of concerns to appropriate institutions and individuals

that are capable of bringing the matter to the Executive Office, so that new work on educational reform may begin.

In conclusion, our efforts are not intended to undercut the good that has already begun. Instead, we too seek reform, but we ask that the reform preserve a society with those qualities of human life that can only be taught through the study of man---not man's machines.

ENDNOTES

1. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform, U. S. Department of Education, W.D.C., (April, 1983) p. 36
2. Ibid, p. 5
3. " pp. 8 - 9
4. " pp. 39 - 40
5. " p. 62 (underlining added by Quinn and Kanter)
6. " p. 25
7. John Minter Associates, "Views of Chief Academic Officers on Changes Among Students: from 1982-83 to 1983-84", Chronicle of Higher Education, October 10, 1984, p. 17
8. Ibid
9. A Nation At Risk, op cite, p. 26
10. Ibid, pp. 33-34
11. Kathy Fedorko Earley, (Review of) The Moral of the Story: Literature, Values, and American Education, Susan Resneck Parr, The Community College Humanist, September, 1984, Community College Humanities Association, p. 3

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